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The Canada Council
Conseil des Arts du Canada

The Canada Council and Dance

Notes for remarks to the Dance
in Canada National Conference,
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The Canada Council and Dance

It is a pleasure to be with you this afternoon to share a few thoughts on the Canada Council and dance.

When the opportunity came to attend this conference, I must say I accepted with what one might call unseemly speed! The reason is that since my arrival at the Council seven months ago I have tried to take advantage of every opportunity to meet the arts community, to voice some of my concerns and those of the Council, and listen to what artists have to say to me. The annual conference of the Canadian Music Council in Guelph this spring was the first of these experiences. I am glad to have another so soon.

The Council, as you may know, will be celebrating its 20th birthday next year - a young organization, yet, in a dancer's scale of measurement, a maturing one. In those 20 years, we have seen a quite astonishing and rapid broadening in our support for the arts, and the size of our budget has increased accordingly. We started life with a scant \$2.7 million for all of the arts, humanities and social sciences. Today, we have more than \$3.2 million for dance in the current year, out of a total budget for the arts alone of \$36.3 million.

Although to the layman that \$3.2 million sounds like a great deal of money, we know of course that it is far less than is needed in the dance field. I have been told about plans for new productions that have been scrapped, seasons that have been shortened, designs for costumes and sets that have remained on the drawing table. The budgeting problems of companies represented by many of you here today are well known to us at the Council. But the reality of the limited amounts we have to spend for dance in Canada must be understood by the dance community, too. Our expenditures for dance - as for other disciplines of music and opera, theatre, writing, film and

video, visual arts and photography, and our Touring Office - are being allowed to rise by less than 10 per cent for the current year. We know that costs in the companies we support have risen far more than that, and that an increase of 10 per cent in our grants constitutes a decline in our support. But we also know - and you know - that we shall have to live with that, as long as this period of government financial restraint lasts.

This being said, I should like to stress that from the Council's point of view, the year just past was a relatively good one for the dance. We were able to provide an over-all 13 per cent increase in the amount allocated for individuals and organizations in this field. And we were able to make some new departures. The Council decided that we should do as much as possible to support new developments in dance. We therefore funded eight young concert-ballet and modern dance companies for the first time, and provided substantial increases to four established contemporary dance companies that were already receiving our support.

The great surge of interest in dance around the world is wonderfully evident in Canada, too. Whenever new companies are created, audiences grow and so does demand for more dance. But this is a demand which the Council can meet only if it gets more money from government, an unlikely prospect in the foreseeable future, or if it cuts back on some existing programs.

When those who are unacquainted with performing arts management ask why "freezes" are so tragic for organizations that already have large budgets I try to point out as best I can that even the largest (and most apparently stable) organizations are not really that stable financially at all. I feel impelled on those occasions to tell the story of the man who owned a fine, high-bred dog. The man was persuaded by a friend that an occasional night

out in the cold would improve the dog's coat and enhance its general health. One winter night he let his dog out and went to bed. But it was a very cold night. And when he opened his door in the morning he found the dog frozen stiff. He thawed out the beautiful animal with tear-filled eyes, but - as he said - it wasn't the same any more! We should be irresponsible indeed if we did not continue to support and nurture the fine, though unfortunately fragile, institutions we have helped to build. With the finite funds at our disposal we shall continue to support good work, and our focus will be on the professional. For while the mandate of the Council is large, its means are relatively small.

However, just because funds are fixed does not mean that our thoughts are fixed too! The Council is aware that we are now in the most exciting period of change in the history of dance in this country. We must rise to the challenges posed, and do some leading and challenging ourselves. You are aware of the kinds of new directions I mean: for example, the concert-ballet company, such as Entre-Six in Montreal; or the choreographers' and dancers' cooperative, which is what one would call Dancemakers in Toronto; or the flexible performing space, as in 15 Dance Laboratorium, where freelance choreographers are trying out new works before an audience. These are some of the new initiatives we were able to fund last year, and which have yielded such satisfying results.

The Council must be able to accommodate such ventures as they come on the scene. But we look to people in the dance community to suggest ways in which we can adjust our programs to support the new initiatives more effectively. You in the dance community can help provide the ideas for structures that will best serve your needs.

You as a group can also use your voices as lobbyists with governments - and by that I mean individual aldermen, members of provincial assemblies and members of parliament. We know that governments can be creative, innovative and responsive. But their members cannot work in a vacuum. They need more information, and they need to be persuaded and reminded that the arts in general, and the dance in particular, are central to life. In helping yourselves this way, you will also be helping us to help you.

Without such persuasive efforts on your part and ours, governments tend to give priority to the many other needs that beset them. Or to quote a witticism from one of my francophone colleagues: les gouvernements ont souvent trop de chats à fouetter pour se préoccuper des entrechats!

There are other ways in which you can help your cause. Members of our staff have begun to prepare what they call an "idea bank" and they look for contributions to it. With this idea bank, we should be prepared to initiate new programs, as soon as our dance budget becomes more flexible.

There is much work to be done, for example, in recording on film the fine choreography and dancing that are being done in this country. There was something shocking, and profoundly sad, in the plaint of an excellent dancer who spoke to us recently. He spoke of a day in the foreseeable future when his best dancing days would be over, and, he said, "no one will remember how I danced."

We also see a need for good training programs in dance administration for organizations.

These and other ideas are now beginning to take shape at the Council. We invite you to join us in making them a reality.

The future of dance in this country depends not only on an absolute

increase in support funds. It depends as well on a collective and creative effort to ensure that even the limited resources we have are used effectively and responsibly.

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